

Jungian Analytical Psychology and Old Age

By: Jerold D. Bozarth, John D. Barry, [Jane E. Myers](#), and Jan E. Heyn

Barry, J. B., Bozarth, J., Myers, J. E., & Heyn, J. (1986). Jungian analytical psychology and old age. *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, 4 (2), 105-110.

Made available courtesy of Sage Publications: <http://www.sagepub.com/>

***** Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Abstract:

Jungian psychology has several special implications for helping older people and understanding their development in old age. The implications are discussed as tenets which apply to this time in life. These tenets are: 1) The meaning and purpose of life, 2) the turning inward and preoccupation with self, and 3) the reversal into the opposite.

Article:

Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us hitherto, But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning: for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true will at evening have become *a lie*. I have given psychological treatment to too many people of advancing years, and have looked too often into the secret chambers of their souls, not to be moved by this fundamental truth, (Jung, C., cited in Singer, 1972, 417-418.)

The intent of this article is to consider some of the concepts and implications of Jung's Analytical Psychology which might offer additional perspectives for working with older individuals. Jungian psychology defies a simple working definition and clear cut description, Figure 1 lists several of the key concepts of Jung's theory of personality which may be of background assistance to the reader. As noted in Figure 1, a succinct (albeit incomplete) definition of Analytical Psychology is that the human psyche moves toward reaching the state of being what one was meant to become, that one achieves a resolution of opposing forces, drives, attitudes, etc. within oneself and begins to understand the meaning of one's life.

Figure 1 *Jungian Analytical Psychology*

The application of Analytical Psychology deals with the human psyche (which includes consciousness and the personal and the collective unconscious) as an inherent urge toward wholeness, i.e., to reach the state of being what one was meant to become (Whitmont & Kaufman, 1973, p. 116). Jung's work included consideration of the extrovert and introvert personalities. Some other key concepts in the theory of personality include:

Anima - the unconscious feminine side of a man

Animus - the unconscious masculine side of woman

Archetype - a content of the collective unconscious which is the psychological counterpart of instinct. All loosely used to designate a collective image or symbol.

Collective unconscious - psychic contents which are not common to one individual, but to many. When these are unconscious, they are termed the collective unconscious, and are rooted in our distant past.

The ego - the centre of the conscious mind

Personal unconscious - repressed memories, wishes, emotions and subliminal perceptions of a personal nature.

Self - the meaning of life, a balance among all parts of personality, the centre of the totality of ego and unconscious and/or the synthesis of ego and unconscious, usually achieved after middle age.

Shadow - the unconscious "natural" side of a human being, the dark side.

(Adapted from Fordham, 1966, p. 146-147)

Jung divided life into four parts: 1) childhood, in which we are a problem for others, and not conscious of problems of our own; 2) early middle life; and 3) later middle life, in both of which conscious problems dominate; and 4) extreme old age in which one returns to the same state as in the first quarter. Jung (1969) referred to the fourth quarter of life (extreme old age) with these comments:

We descend again into that condition where, unworried by our state of consciousness, we again become something of a problem for others. Childhood and extreme old age, to be sure are utterly different, and yet have one thing in common: submersion in unconscious psychic happenings. (p. 403)

The question raised by these considerations is: If one starts from a Jungian theoretical perspective, how, then, does one approach and counsel older people? There are several core Jungian tenets that have implications for work with older individuals. Three of these are described below:

1. There is meaning and purpose to life

The meaning and purpose of life is fundamentally the achievement of self (see Figure 1) as part of the universal whole. To Jung, it was important that older individuals develop a spiritual or a "religious function" in the sense of renewing their concept of God. In Jung's words to Van der Post:

I cannot define for you what God is. I can only say that my work has proved empirically that the pattern of God exists in every man, and that this pattern has at its disposal the greatest of all energies for transformation and transfiguration of his natural being. Not only the meaning of his life but his renewal and his institutions depend on his conscious relationship with this pattern in the collective unconscious. (Van der Post, 1977, p. 216-217)

Three implications of the religious function for older individuals suggest that helpers might: 1) encourage the development of a "religious function" broadly conceived; 2) encourage older people to consider the certainty of death and examine the meaning of death with them; and 3) encourage older people to attend to the meaning of their lives in relation to all things.

Note that a key work here is "encouraging" rather than any word denoting insistence upon, for example, the religious function. This function refers to personal, private spiritual experiences, which have a unifying purpose. Consequently, encouraging religious thinking and activity must be handled delicately and with sensitivity. If we are going to encourage religious or spiritual activity, we must make sure that those activities are both available and accessible to the elderly. In the broad sense, religious function is predicated upon the premise that there is a meaning and purpose to life. This view has been supported by many other theorists, e.g., Nietzsche, Rollo May and Victor Frankl. Whether that meaning lies in the unconscious, in past experience, or in expectations about the future, counselors have a valuable role to play in helping older persons find and explore the meanings in their lives.

The second implication, consideration of death and the meaning of death, may be closely related to consideration of the "religious function." Consideration of spiritual beliefs and the use of life review may be pragmatic ways to help older people face death. Life review allows one to find meaning in and closure to life. In

addition, thinking about and accepting death may be tied to religious beliefs. A religious person may believe in a life after death (rebirth) and not simply death as the end. Consequently, these people may perceive death as a more positive experience that is easier to think about and face.

Related to this, people working with the elderly might be educated as to the importance of the life review. Reminiscing is often viewed as the insignificant ramblings of an older person which must simply be tolerated. Usually such remembrances can be directed toward more meaningful ends. Also, people working with the elderly must be educated to the fact that life review does have the potential to create some problems which must be dealt with. After all, when you are reviewing your life you are dealing with the unpleasant as well as the pleasant. The past cannot be changed, but only dealt with; and a person may need assistance in accepting this. Finally, life review and reminiscence are activities we can encourage as being natural and desirable, but we should not insist upon them.

The third implication, encouragement toward developing kinship with all things, is more subtle and is intertwined with considerations about the meaning of life. This may be viewed philosophically as a movement toward unity. This view is considered to a greater extent under the next tenet.

2. After midlife there is a desirable turning inward and preoccupation with self.

The older individual needs to give up inappropriate youthful attitudes. Older people, along with others, need help with becoming more flexible and adaptable.

Jung stated "...for the aging person it is a duty and a necessity to devote serious attention to himself" (Jung, 1965, p. 17). Jung was referring to a contracting or a desirable turning inward toward a preoccupation with self. In terms of education, this turning inward is related to several factors.

- a) If we accept the idea that by turning inward we find meaning for life, then we must accept the life review that many older people engage in as being natural and desirable.
- b) Activity for the sake of activity is not desirable, particularly when you are forced to participate. Providing activities for older people is fine when they are perceived as meaningful by the older person and when one has the choice of participating or not. While inactivity should not be promoted, activity should not interfere with the healthy turning inward.
- c) This turning inward and self-examination should not be thought of as a constant state. It is, rather, a process. Sometimes we may choose to disengage ourselves. At other times we may choose to be active. This is an important point to remember when dealing with the elderly.
- d) Jung also believed that this search for meaning makes the eventual acceptance of death more possible. If we accept this belief, not only must we accept turning inward and the use of life review, but we must encourage it.

Giving up inappropriate youthful attitudes and segregating older people from others may result in forced disengagement. Some older persons may want this, but many others surely do not. Perhaps some older persons need help in becoming more flexible and in solving present problems. Older persons face increased needs simultaneously with decreasing resources. What they need is time and opportunities for new learning, since old ways of problem solving simply may not work in their new circumstances. They need to address new, tangible problems, and could benefit from counseling interventions and assistance. While some older people will choose to disengage, this should be an option rather than a pre-determined and reinforced direction.

Jung's activities during his older age suggest that turning inward is not an exclusive activity during this time span. Jung was quite active during his old age. He cut his own firewood, cooked, read and welcomed visitors.

Jung's point might be better understood by viewing it as the increased opportunity of the older person to view his/her nature and destiny in life as related to the unity of all things.

The implications of this tenet are that:

a) Dreams, fantasies and unconscious musings might be viewed as natural and desirable means for development, and b) the emphasis on such activities as reminiscence groups and other inward attentive activities are more desirable than meaningless activity for the sake of activity.

3. There is a reversal into the opposite.

Jung believed that there is a reversal into the opposite, involving actual change in the psyche among older people. Many have noted that men become less aggressive while women become more tolerant and accepting of their own dominant behaviors. Men become more accepting of their own nurturant impulses and the whole anima archetype as part of themselves. Analogously, women become accepting of the animus archetype, integrating and synthesizing this into their personality. Such changes in feelings, attitudes, and behavior toward femininity on the part of men, and masculinity on the part of women, has been widely observed among older people. These changes are expected and normal, and are part of what Jung meant by reversal into the opposite. All aspects of the personality become more fully fused and united as the person searches for the meanings of life.

Later years are often a time for increased interiority and introspection. However, it is also true that old age can be a time of freedom, of trying out new roles, new coping behaviors and personal styles of being. An important implication is that counselors can help older people try out new social roles and can provide concrete suggestions for positive and potentially effective changes.

Jung's position that the older individuals may experience some reversal of behavior toward the opposite suggests gradual changes of both personality and behavior. Some gender differences seem to diminish. The less the individual has accepted a part of him/herself, the more is the change that will occur. Ideally, such change is that of a resolution or a coming together of the opposite forces.

Summary

Jung's conception of life as divided into four parts, with old age being essentially a return to childhood, could be interpreted as ageist in tone and substance. The concept that all older persons become childlike is an unfortunate negative stereotype which, though commonly believed in past years, we now know to be untrue.

The obscurity of Jung's writings make his theory ripe for misinterpretation and mistaken application. As such, these tenets of Jung raise a number of questions such as, are we advised to encourage and facilitate the process of disengagement? If we do this, at what point or age should we begin?

One must, however, consider these tenets within the context of the holistic meaning. This context may become clearer by considering Jung's belief that each individual must accept all parts of him/herself in moving toward wholeness and unity with all things. The first tenet presented here, *the meaning and purpose to life*, must be considered in relation to each person's unconscious concept of the patterning within the unconscious. The second tenet, *the turning inward and preoccupation with self*, is related to the consideration of one's progress toward his/her "nature and destiny" in life.

Likewise, the third tenet, *the reversal into the opposite*, has more to do with each person's acceptance of his/her wholeness, e.g., the male accepting the anima and the female, the animus archetype, as parts of themselves.

From an educational perspective, Jung's theory is an important one. Even though one may not agree completely with the theory, it must be emphasized to students that it is one of the few personality theories which looks at

later life. Most of the theories with which they may be more familiar (e.g., Piaget, Freud) seem to end at adolescence as though no additional development occurs after this period. Students must become aware that there are important theories which extend throughout the life span. Personality development and change do not stop at the age of twenty.

Overall, Jung's concepts encourage older people to become more introspective as they search for new ways of finding meaning in their lives.

References

- Fordham, F. (1966). *An introduction to Jung's psychology*. New York: Penguin.
- Jung, C. J. (1965). *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Jung, C. J. (1969). *The structure and dynamics of the psyche*. (2nd ed.). Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Singer, J. (1972). *Boundaries of the soul: The practice of Psychology*. New York: Anchor Press Doubleday.
- Van der Post, L. (1977). *Jung and the story of our time*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Whitmont, E. C. & Kaufman, Y. (1973). *Analytic Psychotherapy*. In R. Corsini (Ed.) *Current Psychotherapies*. Itasca, Il.: F. E. Peacock, 85-117.